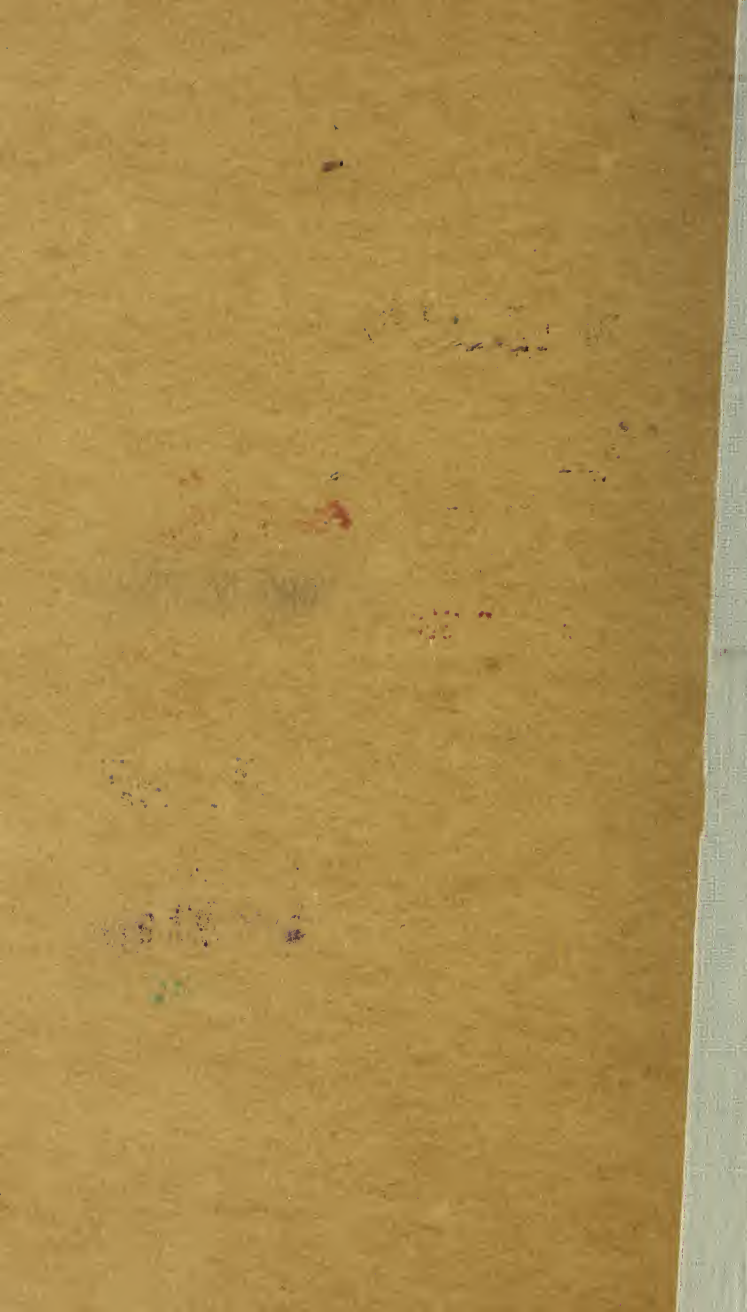


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THE ART OF ACTING

BY

HENRY IRVING.

AUTHORIZED EDITION.

CHICAGO:
THE DRAMATIC PUBLISHING COMPANY.

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I.

THE OCCASION.

I am deeply sensible of the compliment that has been paid, not so much to me personally as to the calling I represent, by the invitation to deliver an address to the students of this University. As an actor, and especially as an English actor, it is a great pleasure to speak for my art in one of the chief centres of American culture ; for in inviting me here to-day you intended, I believe, to recognize the drama as an educational influence, to show a genuine interest in the stage as a factor in life which must be accepted and not ignored by intelligent people. I have thought that the best use I can make of the privilege you have conferred upon me is to offer you, as well as I am able, something like a practical exposition of my art ; for it may chance—who knows ?—that some of you may at some future time be disposed to adopt it as a vocation. Not that I wish to be regarded as a tempter who has come among you to seduce you from your present studies by artful pictures of the fascinations of the foot-lights. But I naturally supposed that you would like me to choose, as the theme of my address, the subject in which I am most interested, and to which my life has been devoted ; and that if any students here should ever determine to become actors, they could not be much the

* An address delivered to the students of Harvard University.

worse for the information and counsel I could gather for them from a tolerably extensive experience. This subject will, I trust, be welcome to all of you who are interested in the stage as an institution which appeals to the sober minded and intelligent; for I take it that you have no lingering prejudice against the theatre, or else I should not be here. Nor are you disposed, like certain good people, to object to the theatre simply as a name. These sticklers for principle would never enter a playhouse for worlds; and I have heard that in a famous city of Massachusetts, not a hundred miles from here, there are persons to whom the theatre is unknown, but who have no objection to see a play in a building which is called a museum, especially if the vestibule leading to the theatre should be decorated with sound moral principles in the shape of statues, pictures, and stuffed objects in glass cases.

When I began to think about my subject for the purpose of this address, I was rather staggered by its vastness. It is really a matter for a course of lectures; but as President Eliot has not proposed that I should occupy a chair of dramatic literature in this University, and as time and opportunity are limited, I can only undertake to put before you, in the simplest way, a few leading ideas about dramatic art which may be worthy of reflection. And in doing this I have the great satisfaction of appearing in a model theatre, before a model audience, and of being the only actor in my own play. Moreover, I am stimulated by the atmosphere of the Greek drama, for I know that on this stage you have enacted a Greek play with remarkable success. So, after all, it is not a body of mere tyros that I am addressing, but actors who have worn the sock and buskin, and declaimed the speeches which delighted audiences two thousand years ago.

Now, this address, like discourses in a more solemn place, falls naturally into divisions. I propose to speak first of the Art of Acting; secondly, of its Requirements and Practice; and lastly, of its Rewards. And, at the outset, let me say that I want you to judge the stage at its best. I do not intend to suggest that only the plays

of Shakespeare are tolerable in the theatre to people of taste and intelligence. The drama has many forms—tragedy, comedy, history—pastoral, pastoral-comical—and all are good when their aim is honestly artistic.

II.

THE ART OF ACTING.

Now what is the art of acting? I speak of it in its highest sense, as the art to which Roscius, Betterton, and Garrick owed their fame. It is the art of embodying the poet's creations, of giving them flesh and blood, of making the figures which appeal to your mind's eye in the printed drama live before you on the stage. "To fathom the depths of character, to trace its latent motives, to feel its finest quiverings of emotion, to comprehend the thoughts that are hidden under words, and thus possess one's self of the actual mind of the individual man"—such was Macready's definition of the player's art; and to this we may add the testimony of Talma. He describes tragic acting as "the union of grandeur without pomp and nature without triviality." It demands, he says, the endowment of high sensibility and intelligence.

"The actor who possesses this double gift adopts a course of study peculiar to himself. In the first place, by repeated exercises, he enters deeply into the emotions, and his speech acquires the accent proper to the situation of the personage he has to represent. This done, he goes to the theatre not only to give theatrical effect to his studies, but also to yield himself to the spontaneous flashes of his sensibility and all the emotions which it involuntarily produces in him. What does he then do? In order that his inspirations may not be lost, his memory, in the silence of repose, recalls the accent of his voice, the expression of his features, his action—in a word, the spontaneous workings of his mind, which he had suffered to have free course, and, in effect, everything which in

the moments of his exaltation contributed to the effect he had produced. His intelligence then passes all these means in review, connecting them and fixing them in his memory to re-employ them at pleasure in succeeding representations. These impressions are often so evanescent that on retiring behind the scenes he must repeat to himself what he had been playing rather than what he had to play. By this kind of labor the intelligence accumulates and preserves all the creations of sensibility. It is by this means that at the end of twenty years (it requires at least this length of time) a person destined to display fine talent may at length present to the public a series of characters acted almost to perfection."

You will readily understand from this that to the actor the well-worn maxim that art is long and life is short has a constant significance. The older we grow the more acutely alive we are to the difficulties of our craft. I cannot give you a better illustration of this fact than a story which is told of Macready. A friend of mine, once a dear friend of his, was with him when he played Hamlet for the last time. The curtain had fallen, and the great actor was sadly thinking that the part he loved so much would never be his again. And as he took off his velvet mantle and laid it aside, he muttered almost unconsciously the words of Horatio, "Good night, sweet Prince;" then turning to his friend, "Ah," said he, "I am just beginning to realize the sweetness, the tenderness, the gentleness of this dear Hamlet!" Believe me, the true artist never lingers fondly upon what he has done. He is ever thinking of what remains undone: ever striving toward an ideal it may never be his fortune to attain.

We are sometimes told that to read the best dramatic poetry is more educating than to see it acted. I do not think this theory is very widely held, for it is in conflict with the dramatic instinct, which everybody possesses in a greater or less degree. You never met a playwright who could conceive himself willing—even if endowed with the highest literary gifts—to prefer a reading to a play-going public. He thinks his work deserving of all the rewards of print and publisher, but he will be much

more elated if it should appeal to the world in the theatre as a skilful representation of human passions. In one of her letters George Eliot says: "In opposition to most people who love to *read* Shakespeare, I like to see his plays acted better than any others; his great tragedies thrill me, let them be acted how they may." All this is so simple and intelligible, that it seems scarcely worth while to argue that in proportion to the readiness with which the reader of Shakespeare imagines the attributes of the various characters, and is interested in their personality, he will, as a rule, be eager to see their tragedy or comedy in action. He will then find that very much which he could not imagine with any definiteness presents new images every moment—the eloquence of look and gesture, the inexhaustible significance of the human voice. There are people (as I have said elsewhere) who fancy they have more music in their souls than was ever translated into harmony by Beethoven or Mozart. There are others who think they could paint pictures, write poetry—in short, do anything, if they only made the effort. To them what is accomplished by the practiced actor seems easy and simple. But as it needs the skill of the musician to draw the full volume of eloquence from the written score, so it needs the skill of the dramatic artist to develop the subtle harmonies of the poetic play. In fact, to *do* and not to *dream*, is the mainspring of success in life. The actor's art is to act, and the true acting of any character is one of the most difficult accomplishments. I challenge the acute student to ponder over Hamlet's renunciation of Ophelia—one of the most complex scenes in all the drama—and say that he has learned more from his meditations than he could be taught by players whose intelligence is equal to his own. To present the man thinking aloud is the most difficult achievement of our art. Here the actor who has no real grip of the character, but simply recites the speeches with a certain grace and intelligence, will be untrue. The more intent he is upon the words, and less on the ideas that dictated them, the more likely he is to lay himself open to the charge of mechanical interpretation. It is perfectly possible to express to an audience all the involutions of thought, the

speculation, doubt, wavering, which reveal the meditative but irresolute mind. As the varying shades of fancy pass and re-pass the mirror of the face, they may yield more material to the studious play-goer than he is likely to get by a diligent poring over the text. In short, as we understand the people around us much better by personal intercourse than by all the revelations of written words, for words, as Tennyson says, "half reveal and half conceal the soul within," so the drama has, on the whole, infinitely more suggestion when it is well acted than when it is interpreted by the unaided judgment of the student. It has been said that acting is an unworthy occupation because it represents feigned emotions, but this censure would apply with equal force to poet or novelist. Do not imagine that I am claiming for the actor sole and undivided authority. He should himself be a student, and it is his business to put into practice the best ideas he can gather from the general current of thought with regard to the highest dramatic literature. But it is he who gives body to those ideas—fire, force, and sensibility, without which they would remain for most people mere airy abstractions.

It is often supposed that great actors trust to the inspiration of the moment. Nothing can be more erroneous. There will, of course, be such moments, when an actor at a white heat illumines some passage with a flash of imagination (and this mental condition, by the way, is impossible to the student sitting in his arm-chair); but the great actor's surprises are generally well weighed, studied, and balanced. We know that Edmund Kean constantly practiced before a mirror effects which startled his audience by their apparent spontaneity. And it is the accumulation of such effects which enables an actor, after many years, to present many great characters with remarkable completeness.

I do not want to overstate the case, or to appeal to anything that is not within common experience, so I can confidently ask you whether a scene in some great play has not been vividly impressed on your minds by the delivery of a single line, or even of one forcible word. Has not this made the passage far more real and human

to you than all the thought you have devoted to it? An accomplished critic has said that Shakespeare himself might have been surprised had he heard the "Fool, fool, fool!" of Edmund Kean. And though all actors are not Keans, they have in varying degree this power of making a dramatic character step out of the page, and come nearer to our hearts and our understandings.

After all, the best and most convincing exposition of the whole art of acting is given by Shakespeare himself: "To hold, as t'were, the mirror up to nature, to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure." Thus the poet recognized the actor's art as a most potent ally in the representation of human life. He believed that to hold the mirror up to nature was one of the worthiest functions in the sphere of labor, and actors are content to point to his definition of their work as the charter of their privileges.

III.

PRACTICE OF THE ART.

The practice of the art of acting is a subject difficult to treat with the necessary brevity. Beginners are naturally anxious to know what course they should pursue. In common with other actors, I receive letters from young people, many of whom are very earnest in their ambition to adopt the dramatic culting, but not sufficiently alive to the fact that success does not depend on a few lessons in declamation. When I was a boy I had the habit which I think would be useful to all young students. Before going to see a play of Shakespeare's I use to form, in a very juvenile way, a theory as to the working out of the whole drama, so as to correct my conceptions by those of the actors; and though I was, as a rule, absurdly wrong, there can be no doubt that any method of independent study is of enormous importance, not only to youngsters, but also to students of a larger growth.

Without it the mind is apt to take its stamp from the first forcible impression it receives, and to fall into a servile dependence upon traditions, which, robbed of the spirit that created them, are apt to be purely mischievous. What was natural to the creator is often unnatural and lifeless in the imitator. No two people form the same conceptions of character, and therefore it is always advantageous to see an independent and courageous exposition of an original idea. There can be no objection to the kind of training that imparts a knowledge of manners and customs; and the teaching which pertains to simple deportment on the stage is necessary and most useful; but you cannot possibly be taught any tradition of character, for that has no permanence. Nothing is more fleeting than any traditional method of impersonation. You may learn where a particular personage used to stand on the stage, or down which trap the ghost of Hamlet's father vanished; but the soul of interpretation is lost, and it is this soul which the actor has to re-create for himself. It is not mere attitude or tone that has to be studied; you must be moved by the impulse of being; you must impersonate and not recite.

There has always been a controversy as to the province of naturalism in dramatic art. In England it has been too much the custom, I believe, while demanding naturalism in comedy, to expect a false inflation in tragedy. But there is no reason why an actor should be less natural in tragic than in lighter moods. Passions vary in expression according to moulds of character and manners, but their reality should not be lost even when they are expressed in the heroic forms of the drama. A very simple test is a reference to the records of old actors. What was it in their performances that chiefly impressed their contemporaries? Very rarely the measured recitation of this or that speech, but very often a simple exclamation that deeply moved their auditors, because it was a gleam of nature in the midst of declamation. The "Prithee, undo this button!" of Garrick, was remembered when many stately utterances were forgotten. In our day the contrast between artificial declamation and the accents of nature is less marked, because

its delivery is more uniformly simple, and an actor who lapses from a natural into a false tone is sure to find that his hold upon his audience is proportionately weakened. But the revolution which Garrick accomplished may be imagined from the story told by Boswell. Dr. Johnson was discussing plays and players with Mrs. Siddons, and he said : "Garrick, madam, was no declaimer ; there was not one of his own scene-shifters who could not have spoken 'To be or not to be' better than he did ; yet he was the only actor I ever saw whom I could call a master, both in tragedy and comedy ; though I liked him best in comedy. A true conception of character and natural expression of it were his distinguished excellences."

To be natural on the stage is most difficult, and yet a grain of nature is worth a bushel of artifice. But you may say—what is nature ? I quoted just now Shakespeare's definition of the actor's art. After the exhortation to hold the mirror up to nature, he adds the pregnant warning : "This overdone or come tardy off, though it make the unskilful laugh, cannot but make the judicious grieve, the censure of which one must in your allowance o'erweigh a whole theatre of others." Nature may be overdone by triviality in conditions that demand exaltation ; for instance, Hamlet's first address to the Ghost lifts its disposition to an altitude far beyond the ordinary reaches of our souls, and his manner of speech should be adapted to this sentiment. But such exaltation of utterance is wholly out of place in the purely colloquial scene with the Grave-digger. When Macbeth says, "Go, bid thy mistress, when my drink is ready, she strike upon the bell," he would not use the tone of :

"Pity like a naked new-born babe,
Striding the blast, or Heaven's cherubim, horsed
Upon the sightless couriers of the air,
Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye,
That tears shall drown the wind."

Like the practiced orator, the actor rises and descends with his sentiment, and cannot always be in a fine frenzy. This variety is especially necessary in Shakespeare, whose work is essentially different from the classic drama, be-

cause it presents every mood of mind and and form of speech, commonplace or exalted, as character and situation dictate ; whereas in such a play as Addison's *Cato* everybody is consistently eloquent about everything.

There are many causes for the growth of naturalism in dramatic art, and amongst them we should remember the improvement in the mechanism of the stage. For instance, there has been a remarkable development in stage lighting. In old pictures you will observe the actors constantly standing in a line, because the oil lamps of those days gave such an indifferent illumination that everybody tried to get into what was called the focus—the “blaze of publicity” furnished by the “float” or footlights. The importance of this is illustrated by an amusing story of Edmund Kean, who one night played *Othello* with more than his usual intensity. An admirer who met him in the street next day was loud in his congratulations : “I really thought you would have choked Iago, Mr. Kean—you seemed so tremendously in earnest.” “In earnest !” said the tragedian, “I should think so ! Hang the fellow, he was trying to keep me out of the focus.”

I do not recommend actors to allow their feelings to carry them away like this ; but it is necessary to warn you against the theory, expounded with brilliant ingenuity by Diderot, that the actor never feels. When Macready played Virginius, after burying his beloved daughter, he confessed that his real experience gave a new force to his acting in the most pathetic situations of the play. Are we to suppose that this was a delusion or that the sensibility of the man was a genuine aid to the actor ? Bannister said of John Kemble that he was never pathetic because he had no children. Talma says that when deeply moved he found himself making a rapid and fugitive observation on the alteration of his voice, and on a certain spasmodic vibration it contracted in tears. Has not the actor who can thus make his feelings a part of his art an advantage over the actor who never feels, but makes his observations solely from the feelings of others ? It is necessary to this art that the mind should have, as it were, a double consciousness, in which all the emotions

proper to the occasion may have full swing, while the actor is all the time on the alert for every detail of his method. It may be that his playing will be more spirited one night than another. But the actor who combines the elective force of a strong personality with a mastery of the resources of his art, must have a greater power over his audiences than the passionless actor who gives a most artistic simulation of the emotions he never experiences.

Now, in the practice of acting, a most important point is the study of elocution ; and in elocution one great difficulty is the use of sufficient force to be generally heard without being unnaturally loud, and without acquiring a stilted delivery. The advice of the old actors was that you should always pitch your voice so as to be heard by the back row of the gallery—no easy task to accomplish without offending the ears of the front row of the orchestra. And I should tell you that this exaggeration applies to everything on the stage. To appear to be natural, you must in reality be much broader than natural. To act on the stage as one really would in a room would be ineffective and colorless. I never knew an actor who brought the art of elocution to greater perfection than the late Charles Matthews, whose utterance on the stage was so natural that one was surprised to find when near him that he was really speaking in a very loud key. There is a great actor in your own country to whose elocution one always listens with the utmost enjoyment—I mean Edwin Booth. He has inherited this gift, I believe, from his famous father, of whom I have heard it said, that he always insisted on a thorough use of the “instruments”—by which he meant the teeth—in the formation of words.

An imperfect elocution is apt to degenerate into a monotonous uniformity of tone. Some wholesome advice on this point we find in the *Life of Betterton*.

“This stiff uniformity of voice is not only displeasing to the ear, but disappoints the effect of the discourse on the hearers ; first, by an equal way of speaking, when the pronunciation has everywhere, in every word and every syllable the same sound, it must inevitably render all parts of speech equal, and so put them on a very unjust

level. So that the power of the reasoning part, the lustre and ornaments of the figures, the heart, warmth and vigor of the passionate part being expressed all in the same tone, is flat and insipid, and lost in a supine, or at least unmusical pronounciation. So that, in short, that which ought to strike and stir up the affections, because it is spoken all alike, without any distinction or variety, moves them not at all."

Now, on the question of pronounciation there is something to be said, which, I think, in ordinary teaching is not sufficiently considered. Pronounciation on the stage should be simple and unaffected, but not always fashioned rigidly according to a dictionary standard. No less an authority than Cicero points out that pronounciation must vary widely according to the emotions to be expressed ; that it may be broken or cut, with a varying or direct sound, and that it serves for the actor the purpose of color to the painter, from which to draw his variations. Take the simplest illustration—The formal pronounciation of "A-h" is "Ah," of "O-h" is "Oh ;" but you cannot stereotype the expression of emotion like this. These exclamations are words of one syllable, but the speaker who is sounding the gamut of human feeling will not be restricted in his pronounciation by the dictionary rule. It is said of Edmund Kean that he never spoke such ejaculations, but always sighed or groaned them. Fancy an actor saying, "My Desdemona ! Oh, oh, oh !" Words are intended to express feelings and ideas, not to bind them in rigid fetters ; the accents of pleasure are different from the accents of pain, and if a feeling is more accurately expressed, as in nature, by a variation of sound not provided for by the laws of pronounciation, then such imperfect laws must be disregarded and nature vindicated. The word should be the echo of the sense.

The force of an actor depends, of course, upon his physique ; and it is necessary, therefore, that a good deal of attention should be given to bodily training. Everything that develops suppleness, elasticity, and grace—that most subtle charm—should be carefully cultivated, and in this regard your admirable gymnasium is worth volumes of advice. Sometimes there is a tendency to

train the body at the expense of the mind, and the young actor with striking physical advantages must beware of regarding this fortunate endowment as his entire stock in trade. That way folly lies, and the result may be too dearly purchased by the fame of a photographer's window. It is clear that the physique of actors must vary ; there can be no military standard of proportions on the stage. Some great actors have had to struggle against physical disabilities of a serious nature. Betterton had an unprepossessing face ; so had Le Kain. John Kemble was troubled with a weak, asthmatic voice, and yet by his dignity, and the force of his personality, he was able to achieve the greatest effects. In some cases a superabundant physique has incapacitated actors from playing many parts. The combination in one frame of all the gifts of mind and all the advantages of person is very rare on the stage ; but talent will conquer many natural defects when it is sustained by energy and perseverance.

With regard to gesture, Shakespeare's advice is all-embracing. Suit the action to the word, the word to the action, with this special observance that you over-step not the modesty of nature. And here comes the consideration of a very material part of the actor's business—by-play. This is of the very essence of true art. It is more than anything else significant of the extent to which the actor has identified himself with the character he represents. Recall the scenes between Iago and Othello, and consider how the whole interest of the situation depends on the skill with which the gradual effect of the poisonous suspicion instilled into the Moor's mind is depicted in look and tone, slight of themselves, but all contributing to the intensity of the situation. One of the greatest tests of an actor is his capacity for listening. By-play must be unobtrusive ; the student should remember that the most minute expression attracts attention ; that nothing is lost, that by-play is as mischievous when it is injudicious as it is effective when rightly conceived, and that while trifles make perfection, perfection is no trifle. This lesson was enjoined on me when I was a very young man by that remarkable actress, Charlotte Cushman. I remember that when she played Meg

Merrilies I was cast for Henry Bertram, on the principle, seemingly, that an actor with no singing voice is admirably fitted for a singing part. It was my duty to give Meg Merrilies a piece of money, and I did it after the traditional fashion by handing her a large purse full of coin of the realm, in the shape of broken crockery, which was generally used in financial transactions on the stage, because when the virtuous maiden rejected with scorn the advances of the lordly libertine, and threw his pernicious bribe upon the ground, the clatter of the broken crockery suggested fabulous wealth. But after the play, Miss Cushman, in the course of some kindly advice, said so me: "Instead of giving me that purse, don't you think it would have been much more natural if you had taken a number of coins from your pocket, and given me the smallest? That is the way one gives alms to a beggar, and it would have added greatly to the realism of the scene." I have never forgotten that lesson, for simple as it was, it contained many elements of dramatic truth. It is most important that an actor should learn that he is a figure in a picture, and that the least exaggeration destroys the harmony of the composition. All the members of the company should work towards a common end, with the nicest subordination of their individuality to the general purpose. Without this method a play when acted is at best a disjointed and incoherent piece of work, instead of being a harmonious whole like the fine performance of an orchestral symphony.

The root of the matter is that the actor must before all things form a definite conception of what he wishes to convey. It is better to be wrong and be consistent, than to be right, yet hesitating and uncertain. This is why great actors are sometimes very bad or very good. They will do the wrong thing with a courage and thoroughness which makes the error all the more striking; although when they are right they may often be superb. It is necessary that the actor should learn to think before he speaks; a practice which, I believe, is very useful off the stage. Let him remember, first, that every sentence ex-

presses a new thought, and, therefore, frequently demands a change of intonation ; secondly, that the thought precedes the word. Of course, there are passages in which thought and language are borne along by the streams of emotion and completely intermingled. But more often it will be found that the most natural, the most seemingly accidental effects are obtained when the working of the mind is seen before the tongue gives its words.

You will see that the limits of an actor's studies are very wide. To master the technicalities of his craft, to familiarize his mind with the structure, rhythm, and the soul of poetry, to be constantly cultivating his perceptions of life around him and of all the arts—painting, music, sculpture—for the actor who is devoted to his profession is susceptible to every harmony of color, form, and sound—to do all this is to labor in a very large field of industry. But all your training, bodily and mental, is subservient to the two great principles in tragedy and comedy—passion and geniality. Geniality in comedy is one of the rarest gifts. Think of the rich unction of Falstaff, the mercurial fancy of Mercutio, the witty vivacity and manly humor of Benedick—think of the qualities, natural and acquired, that are needed for the complete portrayal of such characters, and you will understand how difficult it is for a comedian to rise to such a sphere. In tragedy, passion, or intensity sweeps all before it, and when I say passion, I mean the passion of pathos as well as wrath or revenge. These are the supreme elements of the actor's art, which cannot be taught by any system, however just, and to which all education is but tributary.

Now, all that can be said of the necessity of a close regard for nature in acting applies with equal or greater force to the presentation of plays. You want, above all things, to have a truthful picture which shall appeal to the eye without distracting the imagination from the purpose of the drama. It is a mistake to suppose that this enterprise is comparatively new to the stage. Since Shakespeare's time there has been a steady progress in this direction. Even in the poet's day every conceivable property was forced into requisition, and his own sense

of shortcomings in this respect is shown in *Henry V.* when he exclaims :

“Where—O for pity!—we shall much disgrace
With four or five most vile and ragged foils
The name of Agincourt.”

There have always been critics who regarded care and elaboration in the mounting of plays as destructive of the real spirit of the actor's art. Betterton had to meet this reproach when he introduced scenery in lieu of linsy wool curtains ; but he replied, sensibly enough, that his scenery was better than the tapestry with hideous figures worked upon it which had so long distracted the senses of play-goers. He might have asked his critics whether they wished to see Ophelia played by a boy of sixteen, as in the time of Shakespeare, instead of a beautiful and gifted woman. Garrick did his utmost to improve the mechanical arts of the stage—so much so, indeed, that he paid his scene painter, Louthenbourg, 500*l.* a year, a pretty considerable sum in those days—though in Garrick's time the importance of realism in costume was not sufficiently appreciated to prevent him from playing Macbeth in a bag-wig. To-day we are employing all our resources to heighten the picturesque effects of the drama, and we are still told that this is a gross error. It may be admitted that nothing is more objectionable than certain kinds of realism, which are simply vulgar ; but harmony of color and grace of outline have a legitimate sphere in the theatre, and the method which uses them as adjuncts may claim to be “as wholesome as sweet, and by very much more handsome than fine.” For the abuse of scenic decoration, the overloading of the stage with ornament, the subordination of the play to a pageant, I have nothing to say. That is all foreign to the artistic purpose which should dominate dramatic work. Nor do I think that servility to archæology on the stage is an un-mixed good. Correctness of costume is admirable and necessary up to a certain point, but when it ceases to be “as wholesome as sweet,” it should, I think, be sacrificed. You perceive that the nicest discretion is needed in the use of the materials which are nowadays at the disposal of the manager. Music, painting, architecture, the end-

less variations of costume, have all to be employed with a strict regard to the production of an artistic whole, in which no element shall be unduly obtrusive. We are open to microscopic criticism at every point. When *Much Ado About Nothing* was produced at the Lyceum, I received a letter complaining of the gross violation of accuracy in a scene which was called a cedar-walk. "Cedars !" said my correspondent—"why, cedars were not introduced into Messina for fifty years after the date of Shakespeare's story !" Well, this was a tremendous indictment, but unfortunately the cedar-walk had been painted. Absolute realism on the stage is not always desirable, any more than the photographic reproduction of nature can claim to rank with the highest art.

IV.

THE REWARDS OF THE ART.

To what position in the world of intelligence does the actor's art entitle him, and what is his contribution to the general sum of instruction ? We are often told that the art is ephemeral : that it creates nothing, that when the actor's personality is withdrawn from the public eye, he leaves no trace behind. Granted that his art creates nothing ; but does it not often restore ? It is true that he leaves nothing like the canvas of the painter and the marble of the sculptor, but has he done naught to increase the general stock of ideas ? The astronomer and naturalist create nothing, but they contribute much to the enlightenment of the world. I am taking the highest standard of my art, for I maintain that in judging any calling you should consider its noblest and not its most ignoble products. All the work that is done on the stage cannot stand upon the same level, any more than all the work that is done in literature. You do not demand that your poets and novelists shall all be of the same calibre. An immense amount of good writing does no more than increase the gaiety of mankind ; but when Johnson said

that the gaiety of nations was eclipsed by the death of Garrick, he did not mean that a mere barren amusement had lost one of its professors. When Sir Joshua Reynolds painted Mrs. Siddons as the *Tragic Muse*, and said he had achieved immortality by putting his name on the hem of her garment, he meant something more than a pretty compliment, for her name can never die. To give genuine and wholesome entertainment is a very large function of the stage, and without that entertainment very many lives would lose a stimulus of the highest value. If recreation of every legitimate kind is invaluable to the worker, especially so is the recreation of the drama, which brightens his faculties, enlarges his vision of the picturesque, and by taking him for a time out of this work-a-day world, braces his sensibilities for the labors of life. The art which does this may surely claim to exercise more than a fleeting influence upon the world's intelligence. But in its highest developments it does more ; it acts as a constant medium for the diffusion of great ideas, and by throwing new lights upon the best dramatic literature, it largely helps the growth of education. It is not too much to say that the interpreters of Shakespeare on the stage have had much to do with the widespread appreciation of his works. Some of the most thoughtful students of the poet have recognized their indebtedness to actors, while for multitudes the stage has performed the office of discovery. Thousands who flock to-day to see a representation of Shakespeare, which is the product of much reverent study of the poet, are not content to regard it as a mere scenic exhibition. Without it Shakespeare might have been for many of them a sealed book ; but many more have been impelled by the vivid realism of the stage to renew studies which other occupations or lack of leisure have arrested. Am I presumptuous, then, in asserting that the stage is not only an instrument of amusement, but a very active agent in the spread of knowledge and taste ? Some forms of stage work, you may say, are not particularly elevating. True ; and there are countless fictions coming daily from the hands of printer and publisher which nobody is the better for reading. You cannot have a fixed standard of value in

any art ; and though there are masses of people who will prefer an unintelligent exhibition to a really artistic production, that is no reason for decrying the theatre, in which all the arts blend with the knowledge of history, manners, and customs of all people, and scenes of all climes, to afford a varied entertainment to the most exacting intellect. I have no sympathy with people who are constantly anxious to define the actor's position, for, as a rule, they are not animated by a desire to promote his interests. "Tl in ourselves that we are thus and thus ;" and whatever actors deserve, socially or artistically, they are sure to receive as their right. I found the other day in a well circulated little volume a suggestion that the actor was a degraded being because he has a closely shaven face. This is, indeed, humiliating, and I wonder how it strikes the Roman Catholic clergy. However, there are actors who do not shave closely, and though, alas ! I am not one of them, I wish them joy of the spiritual grace which I cannot claim.

It is admittedly unfortunate for the stage that it has a certain equivocal element, which, in the eyes of some judges, is sufficient for its condemnation. The art is open to all, and it has to bear the sins of many. You may open your newspaper, and see a paragraph headed, "Assault by an Actress." Some poor creature is dignified by that title who has not the slightest claim to it. You look into a shop window, and see photographs of certain people who are indiscriminately described as actors and actresses, though their business has no pretense to be art of any kind.

I was told in Baltimore of a man in that city who was so diverted by the performance of Tyrone Power, the popular Irish comedian, that he laughed uproariously till the audience was convulsed with merriment at the spectacle. As soon as he could speak, he called out, "Do be quiet, Mr. Showman ; do hold your tongue, or I shall die of laughter !" This idea that the actor is a showman still lingers ; but no one with any real appreciation of the best elements of the drama applies this vulgar standard to a great body of artists. The fierce light of publicity that beats upon us makes us liable, from time to time, to

dissertations upon our public and private lives, our manners, our morals, and our money. Our whims and caprices are descanted on with apparent earnestness of truth, and seeming sincerity of conviction. There is always some lively controversy concerning the influence of the stage. The battle between old methods and new in art is waged everywhere. If an actor were to take to heart everything that is written and said about him, his life would be an intolerable burden. And one piece of advice I should give to young actors is this : "Don't be too sensitive ; receive praise or censure with modesty and patience. Good, honest criticism, is, of course, most advantageous to an actor, but he should save himself from the indiscriminate reading of a multitude of comments, which may only confuse instead of stimulating. And here let me say to young actors in all earnestness : Beware of the loungers of our calling, the camp followers who hang on the skirts of the army, and who inveigle the young into habits that degrade their character and paralyze their ambition. Let your ambition be ever precious to you, and, next to your good name, the jewel of your souls. I care nothing for the actor who is not always anxious to rise to the highest position in his particular walk ; but this ideal cannot be cherished by the young man who is induced to fritter away his time and money in thoughtless company.

But in the midst of all this turmoil about the stage, one fact stands out clearly : the dramatic art is steadily growing in credit with the educated classes. It is drawing more recruits from those classes. The enthusiasm for our calling has never reached a higher pitch. There is quite an extraordinary number of ladies who want to become actresses, and the cardinal difficulty in the way is not the social deterioration which some people think they would incur, but simply their inability to act. Men of education who become actors do not find that their education is useless. If they have the necessary aptitude, the inborn instinct for the stage, all their mental training will be of great value to them. It is true that there must always be grades in the theatre ; that an educated man who is an indifferent actor can never expect to reach the front rank. If he do no more than figure in the army

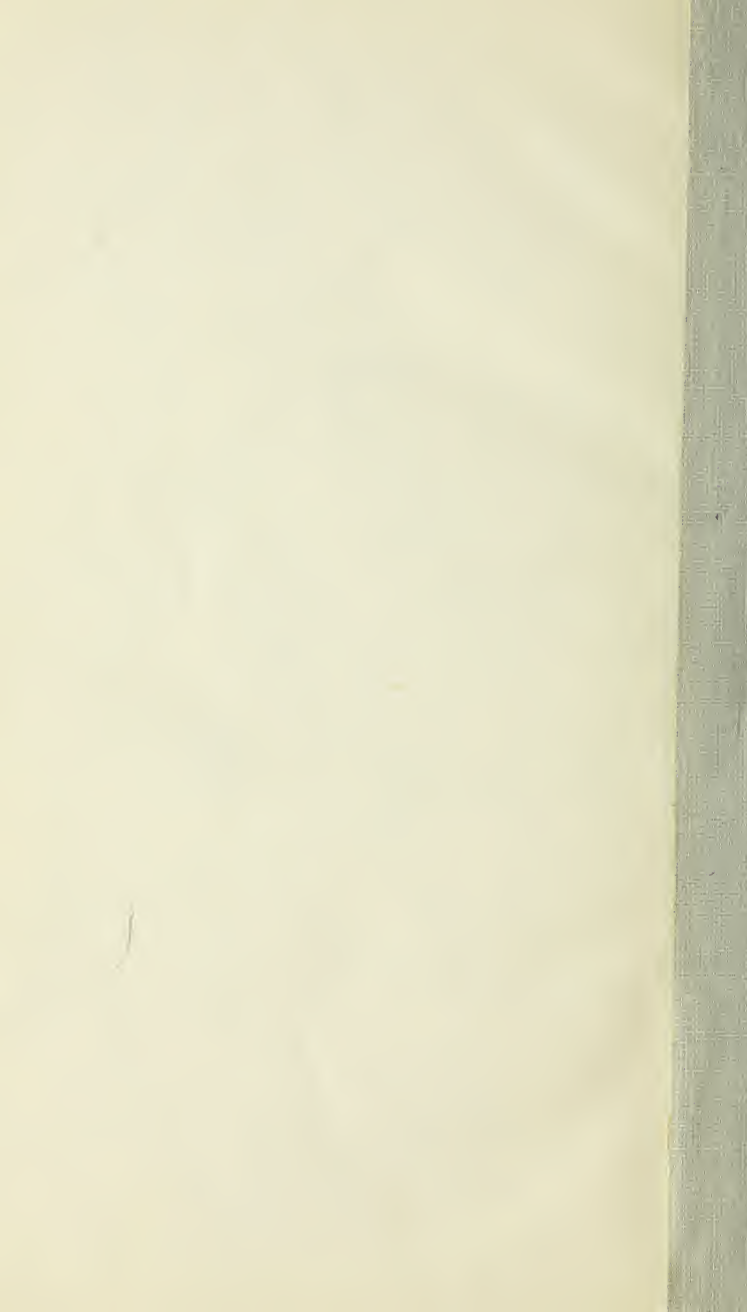
at Bosworth Field, or look imposing in a door-way ; if he never play any but the smallest parts ; if in these respects he be no better than men who could not pass an examination in any branch of knowledge—he has no more reason to complain than the highly educated man who longs to write poetry, and possesses every qualification save the poetic faculty. There are people who seem to think that only irresistible genius justifies any one in adopting the stage as a vocation. They make it an argument against the profession that many enter it from a low sphere of life, without any particular fitness for acting, but simply to earn a livelihood by doing the subordinate and mechanical work which is necessary in every theatre. And so men and women of refinement—especially women—are warned that they must do themselves injury by passing through the rank and file during their term of probation in the actor's craft. Now, I need not remind you that on the stage everybody cannot be great, any more than students of music can all become great musicians ; but very many will do sound artistic work which is of enormous value. As for any question of conduct, heaven forbid that I should be dogmatic ; but it does not seem to me logical that while genius is its own law in the pursuit of a noble art, all inferior merit or ambition is to be deterred from the same path by appalling pictures of its temptations.

If our art is worth anything at all, it is worth the honest, conscientious self-devotion of men and women who, while they may not achieve fame, may have the satisfaction of being workers in a calling which does credit to many degrees of talent. We do not claim to be any better than our fellows in other walks of life. We do not ask the jester in journalism whether his quips and epigrams are always dictated by the loftiest morality ; nor do we insist on knowing that the odor of sanctity surrounds the private lives of lawyers and military men before we send our sons into law and the army. It is impossible to point out any vocation which is not attended by temptations that prove fatal to many ; but you have simply to consider whether a profession has in itself any title to honor, and then—if you are confident of your capacity—to enter it with a resolve

to do all that energy and perseverance can accomplish. The immortal part of the stage is its nobler part. Ignoble incidents and interludes come and go, but this lasts on forever. It lives, like the human soul, in the body of humanity—associated with much that is inferior and hampered by many hindrances—but it never sinks into nothingness, and never fails to find new and noble work in creations of permanent and memorable excellence. And I would say, as a last word, to the young men in this assembly who may at any time resolve to enter the dramatic profession, that they ought always to fix their minds upon the highest examples; that in studying acting they should beware of prejudiced comparisons between this method and that, but learn as much as possible from all; that they should remember that art is as varied as nature, and as little suited to the shackles of a school; and, above all, that they should never forget that excellence in any art is attained only by arduous labor, unswerving purpose, and unfailing discipline. This discipline is, perhaps, the most difficult of all tests, for it involves the subordination of the actor's personality in every work which is designed to be a complete and harmonious picture. Dramatic art nowadays is more coherent, systematic, and comprehensive than it has sometimes been. And to the student who proposes to fill the place in this system to which his individuality and experience entitles him, and to do his duty faithfully and well, ever striving after greater excellence, and never yielding to the indolence that is often born of popularity—to him I say, with every confidence, that he will choose a career in which, if it does not lead him to fame, he will be sustained by the honorable exercise of some of the best faculties of the human mind.

And now I can only thank you for the patience with which you have listened, while, in a slight and imperfect way, I have dwelt with some of the most important of the actor's responsibilities. I have been an actor for nearly thirty years, and what I have told you is the fruit of my experience, and of an earnest and conscientious belief that the calling to which I am proud to belong is worthy of the sympathy and support of all intelligent people.







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